

Kan. Cong. Dist. No. 1  
Keith Sebelius

Form 10-300  
(July 1969)

UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR  
NATIONAL PARK SERVICE

NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES  
INVENTORY - NOMINATION FORM

(Type all entries - complete applicable sections)

STATE: Kansas	
COUNTY: Kiowa	
FOR NPS USE ONLY	
ENTRY NUMBER	DATE

1. NAME	
COMMON: Greensburg Well	
AND/OR HISTORIC:	

2. LOCATION			
STREET AND NUMBER: One and one-half blocks south of US-54 on Sycamore Street			
CITY OR TOWN: Greensburg			
STATE Kansas	CODE 67054	COUNTY: Kiowa	CODE 097

3. CLASSIFICATION			
CATEGORY (Check One)	OWNERSHIP	STATUS	ACCESSIBLE TO THE PUBLIC
<input type="checkbox"/> District <input type="checkbox"/> Building <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Site <input type="checkbox"/> Structure <input type="checkbox"/> Object	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Public <input type="checkbox"/> Private <input type="checkbox"/> Both	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Occupied <input type="checkbox"/> Unoccupied <input type="checkbox"/> Preservation work in progress	Yes: <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Restricted <input type="checkbox"/> Unrestricted <input type="checkbox"/> No
PRESENT USE (Check One or More as Appropriate)			
<input type="checkbox"/> Agricultural <input type="checkbox"/> Commercial <input type="checkbox"/> Educational <input type="checkbox"/> Entertainment	<input type="checkbox"/> Government <input type="checkbox"/> Industrial <input type="checkbox"/> Military <input type="checkbox"/> Museum	<input type="checkbox"/> Park <input type="checkbox"/> Private Residence <input type="checkbox"/> Religious <input type="checkbox"/> Scientific	<input type="checkbox"/> Transportation <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Other (Specify) Tourist attraction <input type="checkbox"/> Comments

4. OWNER OF PROPERTY			
OWNER'S NAME: City of Greensburg			
STREET AND NUMBER:			
CITY OR TOWN: Greensburg	STATE: Kansas	CODE 67054	CODE 20

5. LOCATION OF LEGAL DESCRIPTION			
COURTHOUSE, REGISTRY OF DEEDS, ETC: Register of Deeds			
STREET AND NUMBER: Kiowa County Courthouse			
CITY OR TOWN: Greensburg	STATE: Kansas	CODE 67054	CODE 20

6. REPRESENTATION IN EXISTING SURVEYS			
TITLE OF SURVEY: Survey of Historic Sites and Structures in Kansas			
DATE OF SURVEY: 1957 <input type="checkbox"/> Federal <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> State <input type="checkbox"/> County <input type="checkbox"/> Local			
DEPOSITORY FOR SURVEY RECORDS: Kansas State Historical Society			
STREET AND NUMBER: 120 West Tenth St.			
CITY OR TOWN: Topeka	STATE: Kansas	CODE 66612	CODE 20

SEE INSTRUCTIONS

STATE:  
Kansas

COUNTY:  
Kiowa

ENTRY NUMBER

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## 8. SIGNIFICANCE

## PERIOD (Check One or More as Appropriate)

☐ Pre-Columbian☐ 16th Century☐ 18th Century☐ 20th Century☐ 15th Century☐ 17th Century☒ 19th Century

SPECIFIC DATE(S) (If Applicable and Known) 1887-1888

## AREAS OF SIGNIFICANCE (Check One or More as Appropriate)

☐ Aboriginal☐ Education☐ Political☐ Urban Planning☐ Prehistoric☒ Engineering☐ Religion/Phi-☐ Other (Specify)☐ Historic☐ Industry

losophy

☐ Agriculture☐ Invention☐ Science☐ Architecture☐ Landscape☐ Sculpture☐ Art

Architecture

☐ Social/Human-☐ Commerce☐ Literature

itarian

☐ Communications☐ Military☐ Theater☐ Conservation☐ Music☒ Transportation

## STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

Greensburg's "Big Well," billed as the largest hand-dug well in the world, was dug in 1887 and 1888. The city of Greensburg, which had been organized in 1884, along with most of western and southwestern Kansas experienced a boom in the mid 1880's. By 1886 Greensburg claimed 2,600 inhabitants. The citizens of the town decided the following year that they needed a waterworks system to provide water for household needs, fire protection, and the needs of the Santa Fe railroad, whose first train pulled into Greensburg June 23, 1887. A large well was considered the only adequate source of water in the prairie country, and experts advised the citizens that there was an enormous ground flow under Greensburg, which is about 20 miles south of the Arkansas river.

The townspeople believed that the waterworks project was too much for the financial resources of their young city, so on July 18, 1887, the city council passed an ordinance granting a franchise and right of way to the Greensburg Water Supply and Hydraulic Co., formed under the auspices of the Santa Fe railroad for the purpose of digging the well and constructing the waterworks.

Work on the well began Tuesday, August 9, 1887. Contemporary newspaper accounts indicate 25 to 30 men were employed at the well site. The entire project was supervised by J. H. Rhodes, chief engineer of the Wichita and Western railway (later taken over by the Santa Fe). In charge of the digging and walling of the well was J. W. Wheeler. Harry F. Hall, foreman of the railroad's bridge and building division, was foreman of the carpentry work done at the well. The city council officially accepted the waterworks system March 14, 1888.

Over the years much confusion spread as to how the well had been constructed. Local legend developed that the stone casing of the well had been built on a circular wood platform at ground level which had been lowered inch by inch as the well was excavated. Supposedly when the desired depth had been reached, the casing was fully completed. On August 22, 1960, Harry F. Hall, by then in his 90's, returned to Greensburg and offered an explanation of the construction technique. According to him, the well was cribbed with 2 X 12 planks at regular intervals, as it was being dug, to prevent cave-ins. When the water bearing strata had been reached, the masonry wall was laid, from the bottom up,

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and the supporting timber braces were cut off flush with the stone wall as it was laid. Iron pipes were extended outward from the well into the water-bearing sand for a distance of 40 feet to direct the water into the well. A wooden circular stairway down into the well was built against the wall and supported by railroad irons cemented in the wall.

The well furnished water for the Santa Fe railroad until 1895. When the boom bubble burst in the 1890's and the population dropped dramatically in western Kansas, the Santa Fe tore up its tracks to Greensburg. The well ownership had passed into the hands of the Kansas National Bank of Wichita in 1890, and in 1891 the residents of Greensburg voted 29 to 13 to buy the waterworks for \$25,000. Bonds for the purchase were issued in November, 1891. (Costs of digging the well, building a 100-foot-high water tower, and installing the water system were placed at \$55,000 to \$75,000.) The city used the well until 1932 when a new water system was installed. Since 1939 the well has been a tourist attraction, having been visited by more than two million people.

Although the Greensburg Well may not be "the world's largest hand-dug well" as the local promoters claim, it is certainly the largest in Kansas and in all likelihood in the United States and one of the largest in the world.

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Greensburg Rustler, August 4, September 22, December 1, 1887; February 9, March 15, 1888.

"Kansas Historical Notes," Kansas Historical Quarterly, v. 8, no. 3 (August, 1939), pp. 334, 335.

Kiowa County Signal, November 21, 1890; October 30, 1891.

"Old Well Attracts Many," Progress in Kansas, v. 6, no. 2 (January, 1940), p. 57. (official publication of the Kansas State Chamber of Commerce)

"The Tourists Still Dig Greensburg's Deep Well," Hutchinson News, June 11, 1967.